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The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism:
A postfeminist sensibility ten years on

Rosalind Gill

Abstract

This paper revisits the notion of 'postfeminism' ten years after its formulation in critical terms as a sensibility characterising cultural life. The paper has two broad aims: first to reflect upon postfeminism as a critical term – as part of the lexicon of feminist scholarship - and secondly to discuss the current features of postfeminism as a sensibility. The first part of the paper discusses the extraordinary uptake of the term, and considers its continuing relevance in a changed context marked by deeply contradictory trends including the resurgence of interest in feminism, alongside the spectacular visibility of misogyny, racism, homophobia and nationalism. I document a growing attention to the specificities of postfeminism, including attempts to map its temporal phases, its relevance to place, and intersectional developments of the term. The second part of the paper examines the contours of the contemporary postfeminist sensibility. I argue that postfeminism has tightened its hold upon contemporary life and become hegemonic. Compared with a decade ago it is much more difficult to recognise as a novel and distinctive sensibility, as it instantiates a common sense that operates as a kind of gendered neoliberalism. It has both spread out and intensified across contemporary culture and is becoming increasingly dependent upon a psychological register built around cultivating the 'right' kinds of dispositions for surviving in neoliberal society: confidence, resilience, and positive mental attitude. Together these affective, cultural and psychic features of postfeminism exert a powerful regulatory force.

The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism:
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Introduction: A postfeminist sensibility ten years on

A decade ago, when I wrote 'Postfeminist media culture: elements of sensibility' (Gill, 2007, henceforth *Elements*), I was attempting, like many other scholars, to make sense of the rapidly changing and profoundly contradictory media culture that characterised the late nineties and early noughties, and to interrogate its gender-constructions which I noted were always already classed, racialized and structured by 'stark and continuing inequalities' related to other axes of difference. In the media culture of the time, celebrations of 'girl power' and female success sat side-by-side with the intense hostile scrutiny of women in the public eye; pronouncements about gender equality long since having been achieved were juxtaposed with the growing misogyny of 'lad culture'; and assertions about the redundancy of feminism were paired with an intensified interest in sexual difference, in which any remaining inequalities were presented as the outcome of natural differences and/or as women's own choices. The apparent certainty of earlier periods had fragmented, giving way to a moment in which there was no singular template of normative femininity, and a strong sense of female autonomy, agency and choice pervaded media discourses. Everywhere feminism seemed – in Angela McRobbie's (2009) famous formulation – to be 'taken into account' yet 'repudiated'.

In the article I sought to make three contributions. First to examine and compare different accounts of postfeminism: some stressed an historical shift, others were more interested to connect postfeminism to other 'post' movements (post-structuralism, postmodernism, post-colonialism); and a significant body of work located postfeminism as a 'backlash' against feminism. Amongst the things that troubled me about the first two styles of account was the difficulty in using the term analytically – how could it be applied in practice to generate new insights? What disturbed me about the third was its reductive nature. In framing postfeminism solely as backlash it did not facilitate the possibility of seeing contradictions or

entanglements in postfeminist discourses. The second aim of the paper, then, was to make the case for a term that could be used analytically, that would render postfeminism as the object of analysis rather than – as it sometimes seemed to be – a descriptive notion, an historical one, or even (bizarrely) a scholarly perspective. I set out to elaborate a position for critical scholarship of postfeminism – identifying myself as a critical analyst of postfeminism, not a postfeminist analyst. Taking up the challenge to study postfeminism as a cultural object, the third aim of the paper was to begin to outline what I saw as some of the key contours of this sensibility -- a task to which many other scholars have contributed, before and since (e.g. Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Dobson, 2015; Genz & Brabon, 2009; Gwynne & Muller, 2013; Tasker & Negra, 2007[i]). Some of these core features of postfeminism, discussed in many books and articles, include the emphasis upon individualism, choice and agency; the disappearance – or at least muting – of vocabularies for talking about both structural inequalities and cultural influence (Kelan, 2009) the 'deterritorialisation' of patriarchy and its 'reterritorialisation' (McRobbie, 2009) in women's bodies and the beauty industrial complex (Elias, Gill & Scharff, 2017); the intensified surveillance of women (Winch, 2013); calls to work on, monitor and discipline the self (Ouellette, 2016) and the central significance of a 'makeover paradigm' (Heller, 2007; Weber, 2009) that extends beyond the surface of the body to an incitement to 'makeover' one's interior life, developing a new, 'upgraded' postfeminist subjectivity.

Hard times

Ten years on, the cultural landscape has become even more fraught and complicated. Neoliberalism has deepened its hold, developing from a macro-political and economic rationality with a specific range of influence to a central organising ethic of society that shapes the way we live, think and feel about ourselves and each other. It is disfiguring 'the principles, practices, cultures, subjects and institutions of democracy' itself (Brown, 2015:9). Underpinned by largely unquestioned ideas about choice, entrepreneurialism, competition and meritocracy, neoliberalism has insinuated itself into 'the nooks and crannies of everyday life' (Littler, 2017). Critics write of its 'strange non-death' (Crouch, 2011), and its ability to withstand even

serious economic crises; neoliberalism seems to be, in Catherine Rottenberg's (2016) powerful image, 'on steroids' whilst Paul Heideman (2014) dubs it 'bulletproof'.

The grip of neoliberalism has tightened amidst a plethora of other significant shifts, amongst them the devastating impact of wars in which the US, UK and others have had a major role; large-scale movements of displaced people and migrants which have played out on European shores with heartbreaking consequences; and a Global Financial Crisis that has plunged entire countries into severe and debilitating debt. In the UK a brutal austerity programme, instigated by the Coalition government and worsened by the election of the Cameron/May Government in 2015, has enacted swingeing attacks on the poorest in society through welfare cuts and a series of measures that reanimate class warfare by systematically attacking the working class as well as the very idea of the 'commons'. 'Austerity neoliberalism' (De Benedictis & Gill, 2016) is 'undoing all things public' (Fine, 2015). There are fewer and fewer spaces in which, as Toni Morrison (2010) has eloquently expressed it, 'no tuition is charged, no oath sworn, no visa demanded'.

These are dangerous and frightening times, even for those who live in relative comfort in the liberal democracies of the Global North. The waves of misogyny, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia and xenophobic nationalism that are evident in the vote for Brexit and its aftermath; the election of Donald Trump as US President; the rise and 'respectabilization' of the Front Nationale in France under Marine Le Pen, and the growing strength of Right wing parties and movements across Europe mark a new moment in political life. At issue are fundamental rights of particular groups to exist and to be recognized as human: this war is being fought out in bathrooms as well as courtrooms, and in airports as well as the streets. It is a moment too of renewed 'culture wars', with questions of visibility and representation at its heart; a moment in which the media are deeply implicated yet in which 'alternative facts' and 'fake news' complicate any straightforward recourse to 'reality' and thus make 'speaking truth to power' a problematic endeavour.

There is yet to be a definitive account of these multiple crises that operate across so many spheres and levels. We are living through the first draft of history, as journalists and bloggers struggle to make sense of the 'current conjuncture', as Stuart Hall would have put it. Is this a resurgence of authoritarian populism? Of far Right nationalism or white supremacism? The collapse of globalization? A crisis of liberal cosmopolitanism? One thing is clear: that an analysis of gender is central to understanding the current moment - whether that is the profoundly unequal impact of austerity measures – and their representation (Negra & Tasker, 2014; Nathanson, 2013) or the spectacular misogyny of Donald Trump. Angela McRobbie (2016) argues that 'Trump's unapologetic sexism seems to give *carte blanche* to an insurgent patriarchy which can now re-assert itself with confidence.' How, in turn asks Sarah Banet-Weiser (2016), are young women, raised on stories of 'girl power' and 'choice' and 'empowerment' to make sense of the election of a President who is unashamedly racist, sexist and anti-choice?

Moreover, behind the headlines with their daily litany of horrors, there is an ongoing but but still largely untold story of persistent - and persistently gendered - injustice: the 'slow death' of the (feminized) poor under neoliberalism (Berlant, 2011); the tedious monotony of poverty, of violence against women, and sexual abuse of children which remain endemic features of a world which is seeing a heightening not diminution of inequality, and increasing numbers of people joining a global precariat.

Postfeminism: the new normal

Where, then, does postfeminism fit into this complicated – and frankly overwhelming – picture? Given the forces ranged against 'us' (by which I mean people concerned about social justice), it might seem a trivial concept with which to be preoccupied. Yet its importance resides, I suggest, precisely in its ordinariness and everydayness, its ability to speak to sense and meaning-making about gender that has become as taken-for-granted as neoliberal ideas – a sense-making characterised by relentless individualism, one that exculpates the institutions of patriarchal capitalism and blames women for their disadvantaged positions, that

renders the intense surveillance of women's bodies normal or even desirable, that calls forth endless work on the self, that centres notions of empowerment and choice whilst enrolling women in ever more intense regimes of 'the perfect' (McRobbie, 2015). Like neoliberalism, it seems to me that postfeminism has tightened its hold in contemporary culture, has made itself virtually hegemonic. It is harder today to see postfeminism's 'edges' or borders. Compared with a decade ago it is much more difficult to recognize as a novel and distinctive sensibility; it has become the new normal, a taken-for-granted common-sense that operates as a kind of gendered neoliberalism - and it is all the more troubling for this.

In this paper I have two broad aims. First I want to reflect upon the life of 'postfeminism' as a term, as part of a critical lexicon of feminist scholarship. Where are we at? Is the term still relevant? How has it been used, critiqued or developed? Secondly, I want to focus on postfeminism as a sensibility. I will argue that a taken-for-granted postfeminist sensibility suffuses contemporary cultural life, and, moreover, that it increasingly operates in and through the emotions and subjectivity, and thus might be understood as having an affective and psychic life too.

The paper is structured in three broad parts. In the first section I look briefly at some of the debates about feminism, postfeminism and misogyny, discussing the uptake of postfeminism as a critical concept, but also considering challenges to it – particularly arguments about its redundancy in the light of an upsurge of interest in feminism. In the second part I look at intersectional interrogations of the term postfeminism, highlighting attempts to open up and expand the notion beyond a focus upon young, white, middle class, heterosexual western women. The third section of the paper revisits the arguments of *Elements* to comment on the cultural life of postfeminism. I argue that a postfeminist sensibility is both intensifying and becoming hegemonic. It is also becoming increasingly dependent upon not simply an individualized register but also a psychologized one built around cultivating the 'right' kinds of dispositions for surviving in neoliberal society: aspiration, confidence, resilience, etc. Finally I turn to what I am calling the affective life of postfeminism – the way it increasingly sets up norms and polices the kinds of feelings and emotions that are permissible, indeed intelligible (Butler, 1997). Postfeminist culture, I will

argue, increasingly 'favours' happiness and 'positive mental attitude', systematically outlawing other emotional states, including anger and insecurity. I will conclude by arguing that together the affective, cultural and psychic features of postfeminism exert a powerful regulatory force on women in contemporary life.

Postfeminism: the life and times of a critical term

One of the most striking trends of the last decade has been the uptake of the notion of postfeminism as a critical term. If the term was already much-discussed and contested when I wrote *Elements*, today it has moved centre stage to become a key part of the lexicon of feminist cultural critique. Within media and cultural studies it is notable that discussions have moved far beyond what seemed to be almost a 'canon' of postfeminist texts – *Sex and the City, Ally McBeal and Bridget Jones* (Moseley & Read, 2002; Arthurs, 2003; McRobbie, 2004; Hermes, 2006*)* , etc. The term still animates debates about celebrity culture (Fairclough, 2008; Adamson, 2016) and 'quality', 'post-network' television' (Lotz, 2006), but today has far wider critical purchase. Moreover, the notion has also 'travelled' across other disciplines and fields. It is now used in management and organizational studies (Kelan, 2009; Lewis et al, 2016) psychology (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011), political theory (Madhok et al, 2013; Yates, 2015), education (Ringrose, 2013) and in studies of men and masculinities (Hamad, 2014; O'Neill, 2015). A number of writers point to the extraordinary durability and adaptability of the term, and its capacity to speak to a wide range of pressing contemporary issues (Negra, 2014; Dejmanee, 2015).

Beyond the flourishing of creative and insightful applications, the term has also been refined and developed over the last decade, with suggestions that it is important to make distinctions between different variants of postfeminism. Tisha Dejmanee (2015) develops a periodization of postfeminism, tracing continuities and ruptures with its earlier characteristics. She notes its continued vitality as a critical concept but asks us to think about different <u>phases</u> of postfeminism as it has taken hold across culture - increasingly moving towards 'interiority'. Meredith Nash and Ruby Grant (2015; Grant & Nash, 2017) also seek to push at and develop the term – in their case specifically in relation to the millennial generation. They suggest adding

an interrogative to the word –post?feminism – to indicate that 'feminist engagement is multiple and shifting and that the breadth of issues involved in feminist identification is much more complex today' (Grant & Nash, 2017). In turn Stephanie Genz (2017) argues that 'postfeminism' needs to be 'recalibrated' in response to recession and austerity in which 'the neoliberal mantra of choice and self-determination is still present but becomes infected with the experiences of precarity, risk and the insistence on self responsibilisation'.

Feminism and postfeminism

Another catalyst for rethinking or at least refining the notion of postfeminism is the growing visibility of feminism in recent years. Although in the 1990s and early 2000s celebrations of female success and 'can do girls' (Harris, 2004) were prominent features of the cultural imaginary, they were largely represented in terms of 'girl power' and individual achievement, not feminism. Indeed, the repudiation of feminism (Scharff, 2013) formed a key part of what McRobbie (2009) dubbed the 'new sexual contract'. Today, by contrast, feminism has a new luminosity. Feminist books top the best-seller lists, glossy magazines launch 'feminism issues', musicians, fashion models and other celebrities proudly proclaim their feminist identities, and stories about unequal pay or sexual harassment have become the stuff of newspaper headlines and primetime news broadcasts. Feminism has become 'popular' (Banet-Weiser, 2015), 'cool' (Valenti, 2014) and achieved a 'new visibility' (Keller & Ryan, 2014). It is clearly 'having a moment'.

For some, the new cultural prominence accorded to feminism means that we should radically rethink 'postfeminism', perhaps even jettison the term from our critical vocabulary (Keller & Ryan, 2015; Retallack, Ringrose & Lawrence, 2016). Elsewhere (Gill, 2016) I have discussed this in detail, putting forward a defense of the term, and arguing that we are far from being post-postfeminism. I have suggested (Gill, 2016) that there is a need to make distinctions between different kinds of mediated feminism, arguing that mainstream corporate or neoliberal feminism (of, say, Sheryl Sandberg COO of Facebook and author of the bestseller *Lean In*) may have little in

common with activist feminisms concerned with protesting budget cuts or deportations, and these in turn may be remote from media constructions of feminism as a youthful, stylish (celebrity) identity. Feminist visibilities are, in short, uneven.

Moreover, the new visibility of feminism exists in an environment that is at best highly contradictory and at worst profoundly misogynist. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015) puts it, if feminism is popular then so too is virulent misogyny - hate speech, trolling, etc. (Jane, 2014; Vickerey & Everbach, 2017)- and this needs to be taken seriously. The new cultural prominence of feminism does not map neatly onto the diminution of misogyny, but rather that they co-exist. It is thus crucial that we think together the rise of popular feminism in tandem with rapidly intensifying misogyny. It is also crucial that we develop notions of postfeminism that can theorise both continuity and change, and that do not understand transformation in terms of simple displacement- as if the coming to prominence of one set of ideas automatically displaces another (see Gill, 2016).

The new visibility of (some kinds of) feminism raises complicated questions about the extent to which postfeminism is – or should be – defined in relation to feminism. For me the implicit historical linearity implied by the 'post' needs to be interrogated, as I argued in *Elements*. Postfeminism is as much a neoliberal sensibility as one defined by its relationship to feminism. It may be best thought of as a distinctive kind of gendered neoliberalism. What is striking is the sensibility's dynamism and adaptability: its ability to change and mutate in relation to new ideas. This is seen vividly in the way that postfeminist logics currently operate through a celebration of (a certain kind of) feminism, rather than its repudiation. Indeed, as argued elsewhere (Gill, 2016; Gill & Orgad, 2017), many of the current celebrations of feminism circulating in media culture, have a distinctively postfeminist and neoliberal tenor (see also Rottenberg, 2014).

Past the post?

Some writers have criticized the term. Catherine Lumby (2011) asks us to move 'past the post'. Imelda Whelehan expresses her 'frustration' and 'ennui' with the notion,

suggesting that the activity of critique had become tedious since 'the message requires little unpacking and lies prominently on the surface' (2010: 159). This has not been my experience: on the contrary, contemporary culture appears intensely complex and to be rapidly changing. As a social and cultural analyst I struggle – like many others – to read the current moment, to produce an analysis of the extraordinarily contradictory yet patterned dynamics of power in cultural life (Gill, 2016). Postfeminism is one term in a critical toolkit designed to make sense of this. The term is, to use Sean Fuller and Catherine Driscoll's (2015) vivid phrase, a 'productive irritant'.

The sheer uptake of the term, and the number of attempts to develop and refine it over the last decade underscores this view. It is not without problems, but it certainly speaks to 'something.' Indeed, if it didn't exist, we would probably have to invent it. The challenge to which many scholars are responding is to use the term with greater rigour and specificity, to fashion a notion that is analytically useful and can be put to work in practice, without making it so broad as to be all-encompassing. This means interrogating its reach and delineating its precise features and variable modes of address. It is seen in attempts to think about how postfeminism changes across time and place, as well as in relation to changing trends such as the resurgence of feminism. It is seen also in the development of nuanced and careful language for thinking about novel discursive formations – postfeminist biologism (Favaro, 2015); recessionary postfeminism (Nathanson, 2013; Genz, 2017) – and in detailed explorations of particular features of postfeminism – the 'girlfriend gaze' (Winch, 2013) and 'performative shamelessness' (Dobson, 2015). This greater specificity is seen too in work that develops intersectional thinking about postfeminism. It is to this that I turn next.

Postfeminism: Towards an intersectional perspective

For me as a critical analyst of postfeminism, one of the most important developments of the last decade has been the attempts to open up the term to intersectional interrogation, questioning the assumption that white, western, middle

class, heterosexual young women are the privileged – or indeed the sole - subjects of postfeminist discourse. An intersectional analysis is an attempt to think about power and difference non-reductively; it does not regard inequality or oppression purely in additive terms (e.g. race plus gender plus sexuality) but recognizes 'the complex, irreducible, varied and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation–economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential–intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands' (Brah and Phoenix 2004: 76).

Much critical work on postfeminism has attempted to think intersectionally. Prominent scholars of postfeminist culture, such as Angela McRobbie, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, have been attentive to difference, in particular writing critically about race and class, and arguing that the female subject centred by postfeminism is 'white and middle class by default' (Tasker& Negra, 2007:3). In my own earlier work in *Elements* I reflected upon the need to think about postfeminism as 'structured by stark and continuing inequalities' (Gill, 2007), later arguing:

> 'This, then, is a call to think sexism with racism, ageism, classism, homophobia, (dis)ablism and also to think transnationally (Imre, Mariniak et al. 2009) But it is not simply a matter of integrating sexism with other axes of power and difference, but also facing up to the complex dynamics and complicities in play in the current moment.' (Gill, 2011: 67)

It is not , then, that earlier writing on postfeminism ignored factors other than gender, but rather that more recent intersectional interpretations of the notion have been developed that think race and sexuality and transnationality in terms that go beyond formulations of the 'exclusion' of particular groups. Jess Butler's (2013) work has been germinal in opening up new ways of thinking about postfeminism in intersectional ways that more fully engage with racial difference. In an important article, titled 'For white girls only?' Butler critiques scholars of postfeminism for their tendency to argue that postfeminist culture excludes women of colour constitutively and/or representationally. This is both 'overly simplistic and empirically unfounded'

she contends (2013:48). Butler (2013) discusses several prominent non-white figurations of postfeminism including Beyonce, Rihanna, Nicky Minaj and Jennifer Lopez. These celebrities, she argues, might be seen as postfeminist figures par excellence, yet are rarely considered in discussions of postfeminist sexuality. Butler interrogates the rigid drawing of boundaries around whiteness in relation to postfeminism. She argues that although a postfeminist sensibility may be shaped by racialized contours, women of colour are not (necessarily) positioned outside its interpellations and invitations.

Transnational postfeminism

Building from Butler's contribution, Simidele Dosekun (2015) has further developed this line of argument to question the assumptions of 'Westernness' that are also a characteristic of much writing about postfeminism. She notes that (with a few exceptions) existing scholarship is overwhelmingly concerned with the Western world, and, more than this, that it often understands postfeminism as <u>itself</u> Western - as if the sensibility were distinctively and authentically European or North American. Indeed, to the extent that postfeminism is identified as existing outside the West it is often relegated to the status of a mere imitation or simulacra, or sometimes seen to have been 'exported' as part of a general imperialist tendency, often understood in terms of 'cultural globalization' that flows uni-directionally. Against such readings Dosekun argues for a <u>transnational</u> understanding of postfeminism – that breaks both with the historical linearity which assumes that postfeminism must follow feminism in an invariant sequence as well as with the geographical centring of what Stuart Hall dubbed 'the West and the Rest'. She argues that postfeminism should be understood as 'transnational culture' which circulates through the mediated circuits of consumer culture. In her own research, she demonstrates that in Lagos, Nigeria, which has not been through 'waves' of feminism that would be recognizable in the West, there is nevertheless a powerful postfeminist sensibility circulating, with her interviewees drawing on ideas and self-descriptions that would be recognizably postfeminist if they were expressed in London or Berlin or New York (Dosekun, 2017). It is not, Dosekun argues, that 'any feminine subject, anywhere in the globe can perform a post-feminist identity' at will,

but rather that '[P]ost-feminism sells transnationally—from "Beyonce´ " to "boob jobs" to "Brazilian waxes," from Shanghai to Mexico City to London to Lagos' (2015:9)

One of the strengths of Dosekun's work is that it connects discussions about postfeminism to other key debates about gender, power, and postcoloniality. She asks not only why discussions of postfeminism have been centred on the West, but also, conversely, why postfeminism has not been taken up as a term in postcolonial studies and in development studies. She shows how much existing work in feminist transnational (media and cultural) studies - including the important work of Raka Shome (2014), Radha Hegde (2011), Radhika Parameswaran (2008) and Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994; 2006) - resonates profoundly with critical accounts of postfeminism. In doing so she opens up a dialogue that is both interdisciplinary and transnational and which connects with the growing emphasis upon decolonizing feminism and postfeminism (Giraldo, 2016).

Presumed heterosexual?

Another area where intersectional analysis is enriching critical discussions of postfeminism is in relation to sexuality. The subject of postfeminism is often 'presumed heterosexual' (Gill & Flood in press), constructed through ideals of 'heterosexy' beauty and self-presentation (Dobson, 2015). In recent research Roisin Flood and I have challenged this idea, arguing that lesbian and bisexual women do not exist somehow outside a postfeminist sensibility. The growing visibility of lesbians in mainstream media (from soaps to dating shows) underscores this, with a new emphasis upon lesbian appearing – particularly for femmes – organized around intensely policed appearance norms.

More than this, we argue that mainstream queer spaces are increasingly shaped by recognizably postfeminist and neoliberal values, whether in the proliferation of LGBTQ 'power lists' organized around corporate and celebrity success, or through the promotion of the (commercial) lesbian club scene. We point to the way that

lesbian club nights have adopted a postfeminist tonality, characterized by the repeated use of terms like 'girls' and 'babes' to describe women attending the events, and an emphasis upon sexual conquest that borrows from the terms of lad culture. There is also clear evidence of a re-significaton of practices critiqued by feminists (e.g. 'hot girls' competitions, wet T-shirt contests), as part of a wider tendency towards being 'naughty' 'daring' or 'badass' – even if the 'authority' to which this putative rebelliousness is shown is simply an assumed-to-be-judgmental feminism.

More broadly it is exciting to see an emerging dialogue between scholars interested in queer studies and postfeminism (Ferreday, 2008; Pilcher, 2016; McCann, 20156) Hannah Mc Cann's (2015) analysis of the queer potentials of the TV show *Snog, Marry, Avoid* offers a valuable critique of a perspective that sees in such shows only a relentless disciplining of the feminine body, and it stands out for its attempt to bring queer and postfeminism into dialogue. A contrasting, but equally important, perspective comes from Kate McNicholas Smith and Imogen Tyler (2017) who look critically at the new visibility of lesbians in popular culture and argues – like some theorists of homonormativity (e.g. Duggan, 2003) – that it has come at the cost of de-radicalizing queer. McNicholas Smith and Tyler see in the proliferation of TV lesbian weddings, for example, an attempt at 'post-ing' that precisely mirrors postfeminist and post-race arguments - that is of 'taking queer into account' only to empty it of its potential to threaten the dominant hetero-patriarchal order as well as by wrongly suggesting that homophobia has been dealt with and is no longer a live issue.

Class, age and the limits of postfeminist analysis?

The classed dynamics of contemporary culture have also gained attention in recent years (Wood & Skeggs, 2011; Biressi & Nunn, 2013), and with them postfeminism (Nathanson, 2013; Negra & Tasker, 2014). Furthermore, the growing interest in gender and ageing – alongside the proliferation of highly sexualized constructions of older women (e.g. the figure of the MILF or the cougar) has also challenged the exclusive focus upon youthful luminosities (McRobbie, 2009) in the construction of

postfeminism. It is becoming increasingly clear that postfeminist culture is not 'for young women only' (Gill & Donaghue, in press) and also hails middle-aged and older women (Dolan & Tincknell, 2012; Jermyn & Holmes, 2015; Whelehan & Gwynne 2014).

Three features of identity that do not seem to have yet been theorized in relation to postfeminism are religion, transgender and disability. It seems important that future research interrogates the extent to which postfeminism relies upon binary and cisgender categorizations. Likewise, the way that postfeminism connects to debates about the post-secular and to changes in the way that religious identities are represented should be a topic of research, particularly at a moment in which religious visibility is so freighted. Disability activism and scholarship poses a powerful challenge to the very model of the autonomous subject at the heart of neoliberalism, and research on postfeminism and disability is urgently needed. These represent important directions for future work.

The cultural, affective and psychic life of postfeminism

I turn away now from the use of postfeminism as a critical term to focus instead on the features that characterise this sensibility. A decade ago I identified a number of interrelated elements. These included the notion of femininity as a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference. Fast-forwarding ten years, these features still resonate, but, if anything, have become more deeply embedded in cultural life as the sensibility has taken hold and become hegemonic. Below I look briefly at the cases of the body and surveillance.

The body in postfeminist culture

A key feature of postfeminist culture is the centrality accorded to the body – particularly to women's bodies. In *Elements* I documented a shift in which the body became a defining feature of womanhood, arguing it was presented as 'women's source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness'. Today this tendency is even more heightened. As Alison Winch (2015: 21) puts it: 'In the hypervisible landscape of popular culture the body is recognized as the object of women's labour: it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy'. McRobbie (2009) argues that patriarchy has become 'reterritorialized' in the fashion-beauty complex, creating unliveable pressures that produce a particular kind of melancholia and 'illegible rage' expressed through 'postfeminist disorders' including bulimia, anxiety, depression and forms of addiction.

Appearance pressures have both intensified and extensified, spreading out to include new temporalities (old age, childhood, pregnancy) that were previously regarded as 'outside' the colonizing reach of the beauty industry, and extending across new areas of the body requiring product-solutions: 'upper arm definition' 'beautiful armpits' and the 'thigh gap' - alongside the persistent narrowing and redefinition of the desirable appearance of female genitalia (Braun, 2017; Fahs, 2017). As we have argued elsewhere, 'Just when you thought there simply could not be any area of the body left for beauty companies to exploit, they invent new conditions, for example, 'tech neck': wrinkles and slackness on the skin of the neck as a result of bad postures adopted when using laptops, smartphones, etc.' (Elias et al, 2017:30).

Surveillance is a feminist issue

A decade ago, I argued that 'Surveillance of women's bodies constitutes perhaps the largest type of media content across all genres and media forms. Extraordinarily, surveillance has become an even more central part of postfeminist culture, part of a

'surveillant imaginary' that is 'expanding vertiginously' (Andrejevic, 2015). Within forums such as women's magazines and advertising a surveillant gaze is becoming increasingly fierce, operating at ever finer-grained levels and with a rapidly expanding range of lenses (vascular, trichological, glandular, genetic) that do not regard the skin – ie the surface membrane of the body – as their boundary. This intensified scrutiny of women's bodies has become routine in consumer culture in images that centre on set squares, peep holes and – perhaps most ubiquitously – the motifs of the tape measure (often around a woman's thigh) or the magnifying glass (to scrutinize her pores). Likewise images of cameras, 'photo beauty' or 'HD ready' skin proliferate- underscoring the idea of women as under constant- magnified – surveillance.

Established understandings of surveillance deploying Foucault's metaphor of the Panopticon are giving way to newer formulations such as 'omnoptic' and 'synoptic' surveillance. There is also a growing interest in 'horizontal surveillance', 'peer surveillance' or 'relational surveillance'. Alison Winch's (2013) work has been important in theorising this in terms of the 'girlfriend gaze' – a modality of looking in which girls and women police each other's appearance and behaviour through a homosocial gaze characterised simultaneously by affection and 'normative cruelties' (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans and Alison Mackiewicz (2016) discuss it as a specifically 'postfeminist gaze'. Peer surveillance has been discussed in relation to social media (Dobson, 2015; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015) and young women's image-sharing practices in relation to 'sexy' pictures (Ringrose et al, 2013). Ana Elias (2016) has also reported on interviews with young women in which they report feeling that they are subject to a 'checklist gaze' involving rapid but forensic scrutiny of the entire body by both friends and strangers.

Self-monitoring and self-optimization

Elias's work also foregrounds the increasing significance of self-surveillance in postfeminist culture- again a central part of my argument in *Elements*. The requirement to self-surveil has also been amplified by social media and by digital culture more broadly. The extraordinarily rapid proliferation of beauty apps is one

example of this, inciting women to see themselves within a 'pedagogy of defect' (Bordo, 1997). They range across filters and selfie-modification apps; pedagogic apps offering tutelage over improving one's appearance ('your own personal beauty advisor on your phone'); surgery 'try-out' apps that offer you the opportunity to 'visualize a whole new you' after surgical enhancement, teeth whitening, eyebag removal, etc.; aesthetic benchmarking apps that give the – algorithmic – answer to questions such as 'how hot am I?' or 'how old do I look?'; and apps which use the camera functions of smartphones to scan the body for flaws and problems e.g. moles, sun damage, the effects of smoking, etc. As we have argued elsewhere (Elias and Gill, in press), beauty apps 'increase the extent to which the female body and face are rendered visible as a site of crisis and commodification'. They are part of a wider concern with self-monitoring and self-tracking that seems – beyond the most 'basic' apps for tracking steps or exercise - to be profoundly gendered: facilitating intensive scrutiny and quantification of health indicators, mood, weight, calorie consumption, menstrual cycles, sexual activity, etc. (see Elias & Gill, in press; Lupton, 2016; Neff and Nafus, 2016). Together, these apps produce the – gendered - quantified self of neoliberalism; a postfeminist subject incited to monitor, track, work on and optimize all areas of her life.

Culture and subjectivity

In *Elements* I discussed how the 'makeover paradigm' that characterised lifestyle television was not simply extending to ever more intimate spheres (from homes and gardens to parenting, dating and sex) but, crucially, that there was a growing 'focus upon the psychological – upon the requirement to transform oneself and remodel one's interior life'. In other words, postfeminism, like neoliberalism (Scharff, 2015) has a 'psychic life'. The self called forth by a postfeminist sensibility requires ongoing vigilance and self-scrutiny: what kind of friend/mother/lover are you? Do you communicate well? Are you a wallflower or a sexual adventuress? How high is your happiness quotient? Are you comfortable in your own skin?

Like other features of the sensibility this seems to have intensified, perhaps as part of a broader trend towards self-help culture, and what Kim Allen and Anna Bull

(2016) formulate as a 'turn to character' in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Media messages targeted at women increasingly foreground not simply the individual but the psychological: self-esteem, body positivity, confidence. In work with Shani Orgad (Gill & Orgad, 2015; 2017) I have looked at how confidence has become an imperative in contemporary culture: in education, confidence is hailed as an answer to what is formulated as girls' low self-esteem; in the workplace it will help women to 'lean in' and feel powerful; in consumer culture it is claimed as 'the new sexy'. Moreover, as a revitalized interest in feminism becomes evident across policy and popular culture, female self-confidence increasingly takes centre-stage in diagnoses of the persistence of inequality. Academics and think tanks, politicians and newspaper columnists, call on women to recognise that they are being held back not by patriarchal capitalism or institutionalised sexism, but by their own lack of confidence – a lack that is presented as being entirely an individual and personal matter, unconnected to structural inequalities or cultural forces. The solution thus becomes to work on the self, rather than change the world. Confidence interventions include 'power poses', leadership programmes, email add-ons such as Google's 'Just Not Sorry' which promote the use of more confident language, and an ever-growing range of confidence apps designed to boost women's self-esteem and sense of personal efficacy.

The 'confidence cult' is one example of the way that postfeminism increasingly works upon subjectivity or psychic life. It is an instance of a gendered 'technology of self' (Foucault, 1988) that operates by inculcating a self-regulating spirit to locate both the source of problems and their solutions within women's own psyches (Gill & Orgad, 2017). The 'confidence cult' is also remaking feminism in neoliberal and psychologized terms (Gill & Orgad, 2017) - part of an ongoing therapeutic trend, but one that has dramatically shifted in recent years. Crucially, the focus on addressing social injustice by focussing on personal qualities like confidence or resilience is that it is not disruptive: the small, manageable, psychological tweaks – practising gratitude, 'reprogramming' negative thoughts - are capitalism, neoliberalism and patriarchy-friendly.

The affective life of postfeminism

If postfeminist culture calls forth a subject incited to work on her character and psychic dispositions, then it also works by attempting to shape what and how women are enabled to feel- and how their emotional states should be presented. In *Elements* I noted the pressure on female celebrities to perform a particular kind of upbeat and resilient selfhood – to be 'gleaming' and dazzling' no matter how they may actually feel. Ten years on, it seems to me that this injunction has become almost ubiquitous, part of a wider entanglement between neoliberal capitalism and feelings that Eva Illouz (2007) has dubbed 'emotional capitalism'.

A focus upon 'positive psychology' and 'positive mental attitude' is increasingly central to postfeminist culture. Akane Kanai's (2015; 2017) research on Tumblr posts, shows how women in this social media setting 'are subject to intensified requirements to demonstrate resilient individuality whilst also enacting a pleasing, approachable femininity'. Drawing on Arlie Hochschild's (1983) work, she argues (Kanai 2017) that neoliberal or postfeminist 'feeling rules' shape how young women are allowed to be and to feel, inciting them to deal with difficulties through 'humorous, upbeat quips' in which pain and struggle must be rendered into 'safe, funny, "girl-friendly" anecdotes'. Yvonne Ehrstein's (2017) analysis of posts on Mumsnet evidences a similar tendency, characterised by 'affect policing' and the 'translation' of intense rage (for example about the unequal division of domestic labour) into funny, pleasing and relatable posts, frequently marked by concerns that AIBU (am I being unreasonable?). In this way, a postfeminist sensibility shapes not only culture, conduct, and psychic life, but also produces a distinctive 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1961) in which women must disavow – or at least render palatable - a whole range of experiences and emotions – notably insecurity, neediness, anger and complaint.

Toxic insecurity

The requirement for women to repudiate vulnerability and neediness is evident in contemporary research on sex and relationship advice- particularly that directed at women who have relationships with men. Laura García-Favaro (2017) and Rachel Wood (2017) both document an increasing focus on 'positive mental attitude' and

‘zapping negative thinking’. Self-doubt and neediness are presented as toxic states, whilst the notion of ‘low self-esteem’ has become rendered in some circles as a (classed) term of abuse (Thompson & Donaghue,2014; O’Neill, 2017). If confidence is the new sexy, then insecurity is undoubtedly the new ugly - at least when it presents in women. ‘The problem is YOU’ says advice discussed by Maria Adamson and Suvi Salmenniemi (2017). Yet there is a profound asymmetry in this, which does not see a parallel outlawing of male vulnerability – or indeed even of claims to victimhood (see García-Favaro, 2015; García-Favaro & Gill, 2015; Jankowski & Gill, in press).

Dance like nobody’s watching: (post)feminism and the inspiration industry

This is simultaneously affective, aesthetic and political. It mandates that women remain positive and upbeat in the face of continuing inequalities, pathologizing affective responses such as vulnerability or anger that register the injurious nature of neoliberal capitalism (Gill& Kanai, 2017). The ‘right’ to feel angry (or hurt) is questioned not just politically but also seen to represent ‘ugly’ – that is psychologically and aesthetically unappealing - subject positions of female complaint (Berlant, 2008); the ‘feminist killjoy’ Ahmed (2010). Women may occasionally note such feelings but are required quickly to ‘move on’, reframing their experiences in an upbeat, forward-thinking and positive manner.

More broadly, positive sentiments are disseminated through a multiplicity of ‘inspirational’ aphorisms, from greetings cards to Facebook walls that exhort women (but not men) to ‘dance like nobody is watching’ or ‘love like you’ve never been hurt’. These endlessly circulating feeling rules offer up powerful messages of hope and possibility, wrapped in a vaguely defiant sense of self-belief that communicates a postfeminist sentiment of entitlement – in this case to happiness. As Ruth Williams (2014) has argued in her fascinating study of the book *Eat Pray Love,* these kinds of uplifting and inspirational messages foreground women's individual empowerment and capacity to resist patriarchal scripts - e.g. selflessness, marriage, children – yet at the same time they rely upon a depoliticised mindset that might be thought of as a kind of 'spiritual materialism'. Unlike the deferred gratifications of makeover culture, in which hard work brings ultimate reward (being slimmer, a

better parent, etc), these media messages focus on women living their best lives right now. The postfeminist subject conjured here is, in Janice Peck's (2008: 220-21) terms, solely responsible for creating her own happiness 'by thinking positive thoughts and making good choices' guided by what I see as a feminised 'inspiration industry' with its posters, memes and signage (see Gill, 2018). This calls forth a hedonistic attitude, but one that harnesses 'the dream of women's emancipation' to 'the engine of capitalist accumulation' (Fraser,2013: 110-11), and crucially not to radical social transformation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have reflected back – and forwards – on postfeminism as a sensibility, considering both the value and development of the term as a critical notion, and the contours of postfeminism today. I have attempted to capture a sense of a postfeminist sensibility – understood in terms of gendered neoliberalism – as increasingly hegemonic and taken for granted, despite – and in some ways operating through – its coexistence with a revitalised feminism (see also Gill, 2016). Most of the elements of the sensibility that I – and many other scholars – discuss remain present in force, often in intensified form; postfeminism maintains a strong grip across culture and media to be sure. However, I have attempted to develop my earlier arguments about the relationship between culture and subjectivity to suggest that it also operates on and through emotions and forms of selfhood, establishing and policing distinctive feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1983): and psychological dispositions . In this sense, postfeminism – like neoliberal capitalism more broadly – has a distinctive 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 2001[1961]) or 'mood economy' (Silva, 2013), and future discussions should engage not only with its cultural forms but also with the affective and psychic life of postfeminism.

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[i] I am limited by the number of references I can cite here, but I wish to make clear the abundance of excellent critical writing on postfeminism, and my conviction that this is a collective conversation